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ABSTRACT

Despite the lengthy English language training experienced by most Japanese students, their communicative use of English is not well developed. Videotape recordings of dramas (movies, television programs, and plays) offer a means and an interesting context for developing linguistic knowledge into usable language skills. A good movie provides a self-contained world with language expressed in a visual context. The teacher is in a position to exploit this rich resource by making the story and its language comprehensible to the student much as any literature teacher would, in terms of plot, characters, setting, and theme. A method used in one Japanese university involves showing a full-length movie in 10-minute segments over a period of about 12 classes. The classes consist of a review of the movie to date, student viewing of a new segment, discussion and explanation of the segment shown, and a summary, usually written by pairs of students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the method is effective for helping students gain confidence in using English to ask and answer questions and to listen and comprehend details. Students' attention span and interest also appear to improve. Role-playing and additional discussion are seen as potentially beneficial with this approach. (MSE)

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VIDEOS AS LITERATURE IN EFL

A speech for presentation on March 29,1990 at Trinity College

for

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Dublin, Ireland

by

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Abstract for **VIDEOS AS LITERATURE IN EFL**

Japanese college students usually have at least six years of background in English from junior and senior high school. However, since both grammar and vocabulary are often learned as discrete elements without context, students are generally unable to use English in a communicative situation.

Teachers can offer students an interesting context for developing their bits and pieces of linguistic paraphernalia into usable English with the help of video dramas (movies, TV programs, plays, etc.).

A good movie provides a self-contained world with language expressed in a visual context. The teacher is in a position to exploit this rich resource by making the story and its language comprehensible to the students in terms of plot, character, setting, and theme much as any literature teacher would with a native audience.

The methodology involves showing a complete movie in ten minute segments over a period of about twelve classes. The classes consist of a review of the movie to the present, student viewing of today's segment, discussion and explanation of the segment shown, and a summary (usually written in pairs).

As a result (undocumented), the students exhibit enhanced communication skills after even one complete movie.

I)My problem

I have a problem. In fact, like all teachers, I have many problems. But today I'd like to talk about the problem of teaching English to students who aren't necessarily keen on learning it and, having learned a modest amount, are incredibly shy about using it.

A)students

I teach at St. Michael's (or in Japanese, Yashiro) University, a small school of about 2,000 students, mostly male, in Kobe, Japan. Although our students generally are not especially fond of English, I find them bright, creative, and very hardworking in areas where they stand a good chance of success.

As with the overwhelming majority of Japanese college students, they have studied English for three years in jr.high and three years in high school. However, they've spent those six years translating disjointed, unrelated sentences and filling in blanks on multiple choice exams. Almost without exception, they've never had an opportunity to use English for communication. Generally speaking, I'm the first foreigner they've ever been face to face with, and this face coupled with the language that was their nemesis in secondary school is quite enough to confirm them forever in the "I hate English syndrome."

But, in spite of their lack of confidence and fear of English, they know deep down inside that they need it. The number of college students who vacation abroad is increasing yearly. In addition, the number of those who are girls is astounding. Well over fifty percent of Japanese college women will spend some time abroad. Socially, young men can't compete unless they have some international experience. The movies they watch, the music they listen to, the sports they play, the subjects they study, the commercials they watch on TV are in or loaded with English. After graduation, even if they don't get a job in foreign trade, they'll undoubtedly find themselves in front of a computer, punching an English keyboard in response to a software prompt in

English. Love it or hate it, they need English.

B)time

Of course, their needing English doesn't mean that I can give it to them. I see my freshmen at most 26 times in a year. I don't believe that I can do in that short time what far better teachers have failed to do in six years: teach them to master English. However, I do think that in that short time I can change their perception of English, show them that they can use it for communication, that the time they've spent on it was not wasted, and that with a bit of consistant effort, they can improve on what they now have.

C)philosophy

My basic philosophy of teaching is that students only learn what they need to know when they need to know it. I believe teachers are simply student resources for information, ready reference, about language, culture, and experience. Furthermore, I'm certain that virtually anyone, on being offered the ability to speak and understand a foreign language by the LAD fairy godmother, any language, would jump at the chance to acquire it. Who would be so foolish to miss the chance to eavesdrop on the dark secrets of foreigners? I'm also convinced that we learn languages differently from the way we learn math. Language is not just a set of symbols that can be placed in a form like A squared plus B squared equals C squared, or more to the point S=Np+Vp. Language cannot be divorced from meaning. As Krashen, Asher, Lazonov, and Terrel have stressed, language is absorbed or acquired from comprehensible input in a language rich environment rather than consciously learned.

II) Teaching ESL need not be different from teaching literature.

Even if they have sometimes gotten bogged down in grammar and syntax, symbolism and stylistics, English literature teachers have always affirmed the primacy of the story, whether it be in the form of a novel or a poem. Marshall Mc Luhan's famous line

"the medium is the message" is actually an assertion that the medium exists for the sake of the message. With my students, I'm engaged in an attempt to get them to use the media of both language and video to get to the message.

A) definition of literature

Webster defines literature as writing, but especially imaginative writing. Widowson emphasizes the fictional nature of literature, that it is non-factual and therefore open to interpretation. Both would agree that a play, a drama, is literature since it is written down in a script, so I see no reason for denying the same term to a movie.

B)movies as literature

Here I'm referring not to travelogs, documentaries, biographies, home videos of your dog licking ice-cream off your child's adorable face, but to standard academy award quality feature length Hollywood fare: movies like Bonnie and Clyde, Witness, The Graduate, Love Story, A Touch of Class, Roman Holiday, or Paper Moon. I mean movies that have the power to interest and move audiences with their action, acting, dialog, cinematic technique, and story.

C)terms of literature teaching applied to movies

Literature has traditionally been taught in terms of plot, setting, character, and theme. Movies lend themselves to the same terms of analysis. Language use, acting, and cinematic technique are implicit elements of each category.

a)plot

The plot is the essence of the story, whether in a novel, a poem, or a movie. It's what makes us read or watch to the end. When I choose a movie for my students, it's the plot, the story, and how well it works that I pay the most attention to. I generally demand a chronologically presented plot with clear transitions of action, mood, and scene. Since my students are not

united in their English ability, they need a familiar plot visually presented in a standard sequence to draw them together into a common interest in the story. For my students at least, the story must have a logical chain of events: a beginning, middle, and end. The story is more important than the words that tell it. One film I use is Bonnie and Clyde.

The plot of Bonnie and Clyde is quite straightforward. A handsome ex-con meets a beautiful small-town girl. They set out on an adventure gradually involving others in their crimes. As their robberies become more violent and risky, the police net closes in around them. Finally, Bonnie and Clyde are trapped and brutally killed.

Each scene has, of course, its own plot which must be understood on its own and in relation to the whole. Insofar as the students need help, the teacher's job is to clarify the development of these subplots in the context of the story.

b)character

I choose movies with a limited cast of recognizable characters. When I first started using movies, I was surprised how many students were unable to distinguish one character from another because they were all foreigners. Once the characters can be named and differentiated, it becomes possible for the students to understand their actions, sympathize with them, and relate to them. It's through the characters that they not only hear but see language at work. Movies are able to display a variety of accent and contextualized usage that no single teacher in a classroom could otherwise hope to make available to his students. Movies can either make or break misconcepts about foreign cultures and people, but they certainly destroy the myth that there is only one English and that all its speakers express themselves the same way. Students learn that English is as individual as its speakers, and therefore they needn't be overly concerned about their own accents and grammar.

The characters in a movie have certain physical and mental properties. Faced with the events of the story, each character,

although remaining the same person, must change or strengthen these properties to meet developments.

Clyde is a petty thief who becomes a notorious bank robber and murderer. In the course of the movie, his intelligence and ambition are subverted by his pride and the narrowness of his moral vision.

Bonnie's pride in her beauty and intelligence make it easy for her to forsake her small town life for the sake of an adventure with a handsome young man. Although her love for Clyde increases, her gradual disillusionment with pure adventure and realization of the limitations of Clyde's world make her tragic end inevitable.

To make the film comprehensible, the course of these developments needs to be charted.

c)setting

The setting, of course, is where the action takes place. Discussing the setting gives us the oportunity to talk about the geography, history, and culture of the area, what it has in common with the homeland of my students and what are its differences. Again, it's a chance to discuss regional accents, dress, prejudices, and concerns. This is all input that a carefully selected movie can make vividly comprehensible. I select movies that portray a realistic English speaking community at a definable period: Bonnie and Clyde during the Great Depression, The Graduate during the sixties, perhaps Born on the Fourth of July or Platoon during the Viet Nam era.

The setting of Bonnie and Clyde is the American Southwest during the time of The Great Depression. The poverty and hopelessness of the period and the land set Bonnie and Clyde's ambition in relief and give a quasi-justification for their resort to a life of crime. As with plot, each scene has a setting in relation to the story as a whole. The car that they spend their life riding in becomes the "costa bower", the coach taking them to their death. The desert where they hold a clandestine family picnic, becomes a symbol of their desiccated world. The

fresh spring leaves of the woods along a country road ironically hide the police ambush that will end their career.

d)theme

The themes that generally interest my students are love and coming of age. But any theme that can be shown as relevant to their lives would be appropriate. Discussion of the theme leads to the literary and cinematic devices that exemplify it: foreshadowing, irony, symbolism, and so on.

The main theme of Bonnie and Clyde is that evil masquerades as good. Clyde is a good friend and companion. Bonnie writes a poem claiming he's "honest and upright and clean", but although he is devoted to friends and family, he has no sense of responsibilty toward others in society. After almost being killed trying to steal food from a grocery store, Clyde complains "You can't even get something to eat without some son-of-a-bitch coming after you with a meat cleaver." Through foreshadowing and symbolism, the main theme interlaces with sub-themes involving manhood, sterility, freedom of choice, and finally death, as the movie progresses from scene to scene. Generally speaking, unless these elements are pointed out, my students miss them completely in concentrating on the action. But these are the very elements that can give students real depth of interest in the film.

D)reason for using movies

My students are used to watching foreign movies, but always translated or subtitled. It's both refreshing and challenging for them to experience them in the original and from a native speaker's viewpoint. They get not only the language of the movie but also my interpretation of it.

E) reason for using fiction

My interpretation may or not be correct, but since the movie is fiction, the students are free to interpret the movie for themselves within the bounds of the world it presents. They can disagree with me and I with them without either of us being labeled wrong. Furthermore, as fiction, the movie can present a

comprehensible world, controlled, true, and complete in itself. The students may respond individually or communally to it without feeling threatened.

III)method

I've been talking about my justification for using videos as literature in my EFL classes. It's about time to get down to discussing just how I use them.

a.the movie

A feature length movie usually lasts about ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes. That's way beyond the attention span of my students packed in a dark stuffy room. So, I break the movie into segments of about ten minutes, covering three or four scenes. As much as possible, I try to end each segment on a cliff-hanger. If that means adding or subtracting a couple of minutes, so be it. I try to show a complete movie in ten or twelve classes , in other words two movies a year.

b.preview or recap

Before I begin a new movie, I tell the students a bit about the history of the film, when it was made and by whom, who starred in it, and whether it got any awards. Then I give the students a short preview of the story and explain why I think it will interest them. At the beginning of each class I list the main characters on the blackboard. Then, I recap the story from the beginning with special emphasis on last week's installment and give them a short preview of today's segment, usually by asking them what they expect to happen given last week's developments. It takes about ten to fifteen minutes.

c.viewing

Next, the students watch today's segment. While they're watching the film, I make a rough outline of the scenes on the board. This helps them and me remember the sequence of events.

d.explanation

After the viewing, I explain the segment in terms of plot, character, setting, and theme, scene by scene. In my explanation, I avoid outright repetition, because it's boring, but I try to

use synonyms, kennings, and alternative grammatical structures wherever I can to enrich the story. This is a good time for any questions the students might have or for a role play to clarify a scene that they didn't understand. It takes fifteen to twenty minutes.

e.student summary

Finally, I ask the students to work in pairs to summarize the story. I like the idea of pair work because it gives the class a social atmosphere. The students can talk to each other freely in Japanese or English as long as it's about the movie. It usually works out that one becomes the scribe and the other the interpreter and switch jobs every week. They inevitably begin by trying to translate Japanese ideas word for word into English, but soon figure out it's more efficient to work directly in the language of the movie. Students who consider themselves slow in English are quick to realize that they'd best team up with someone who's good. Japanese students have a very heavy sense of duty among their peers. The better students try very hard to help the slower ones who in turn do their best to be less of a burden. On the way, everyone improves. While the students are working, I walk around and answer any questions about the movie or grammar and spelling. Every word I spell or structure I explain is put on the board without comment so others may use it. I refuse to answer questions in Japanese, although I allow other students to answer, but I do my best to answer questions in any other medium, be it action, grunts and groans, drawing, or English.

f.grading

All during this period I keep track of their writing and let them know if they've written something that I don't understand. However, during the last fifteen minutes of the class, I go around and mark papers that are finished and note glaring errors. I mark in terms of volume and comprehensibility rather than grammar or spelling. My concern is that they gain confidence in their ability to communicate. Mastery, if there is such a thing, is not the purpose of my twenty-six weeks with them.

A)possibilities for change

Although I teach the class in terms of literature, the summaries usually deal with the bare details of the story. If I had smaller classes, more individual attention might bring out greater development of the other elements. I also think much more time could be spent on role plays and discussion.

IV)results

Nonetheless, the results of my classes so far have been moderately gratifying. My students have by and large lost their former fear of English and developed a certain self-confidence in their ability to ask and answer questions as well as listen to and relate the details of a story in understandable English. They often work well past the bell to finish a story or stay around after class to ask me questions or even ask my advice about things totally unrelated to English. Their listening ability and attention span in English improves dramatically. Although I never tell them to take notes, some students start the practice in Japanese after a couple of weeks and by the end of the year most are taking notes either all or mostly in English. I praise them especially if they catch some piece of dialog perfectly or pick up some word or action that I missed. I'm often gratified that in their transcripts they have notes on theme, setting, and character that they didn't have the time or perhaps vocabulary to include in their summaries. Mostly I'm grateful for their enthusiasm and your patience in listening to me.

Thank you very much.